



For a moment, the cameras hold on Peeta's downcast eyes as what he says sinks in. Then I can see my face, mouth half open in a mix of surprise and protest, magnified on every screen as I realize, *Me! He means me!* I press my lips together and stare at the floor, hoping this will conceal the emotions starting to boil up inside of me.

"Oh, that is a piece of bad luck," says Caesar, and there's a real edge of pain in his voice. The crowd is murmuring in agreement, a few have even given agonized cries.

"It's not good," agrees Peeta.

"Well, I don't think any of us can blame you. It'd be hard not to fall for that young lady," says Caesar. "She didn't know?"

Peeta shakes his head. "Not until now."

I allow my eyes to flicker up to the screen long enough to see that the blush on my cheeks is unmistakable.

"Wouldn't you love to pull her back out here and get a response?" Caesar asks the audience. The crowd screams assent. "Sadly, rules are rules, and Katniss Everdeen's time has been spent. Well, best of luck to you, Peeta Mellark, and I think I speak for all of Panem when I say our hearts go with yours."

The roar of the crowd is deafening. Peeta has absolutely

wiped the rest of us off the map with his declaration of love for me. When the audience finally settles down, he chokes out a quiet "Thank you" and returns to his seat. We stand for the anthem. I have to raise my head out of the required respect and cannot avoid seeing that every screen is now dominated by a shot of Peeta and me, separated by a few feet that in the viewers' heads can never be breached. Poor tragic us.

But I know better.

After the anthem, the tributes file back into the Training Center lobby and onto the elevators. I make sure to veer into a car that does not contain Peeta. The crowd slows our entourages of stylists and mentors and chaperones, so we have only each other for company. No one speaks. My elevator stops to deposit four tributes before I am alone and then find the doors opening on the twelfth floor. Peeta has only just stepped from his car when I slam my palms into his chest. He loses his balance and crashes into an ugly urn filled with fake flowers. The urn tips and shatters into hundreds of tiny pieces. Peeta lands in the shards, and blood immediately flows from his hands.

"What was that for?" he says, aghast.

"You had no right! No right to go saying those things about me!" I shout at him.

Now the elevators open and the whole crew is there, Effie, Haymitch, Cinna, and Portia.

"What's going on?" says Effie, a note of hysteria in her voice. "Did you fall?"

"After she shoved me," says Peeta as Effie and Cinna help him up.

Haymitch turns on me. "Shoved him?"

"This was your idea, wasn't it? Turning me into some kind of fool in front of the entire country?" I answer.

"It was my idea," says Peeta, wincing as he pulls spikes of pottery from his palms. "Haymitch just helped me with it."

"Yes, Haymitch is very helpful. To you!" I say.

"You *are* a fool," Haymitch says in disgust. "Do you think he hurt you? That boy just gave you something you could never achieve on your own."

"He made me look weak!" I say.

"He made you look desirable! And let's face it, you can use all the help you can get in that department. You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do. You're all they're talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve!" says Haymitch.

"But we're not star-crossed lovers!" I say.

Haymitch grabs my shoulders and pins me against the wall. "Who cares? It's all a big show. It's all how you're perceived. The most I could say about you after your interview was that you were nice enough, although that in itself was a small miracle. Now I can say you're a heartbreaker. Oh, oh, oh, how the boys back home fall longingly at your feet. Which do you think will get you more sponsors?"

The smell of wine on his breath makes me sick. I shove his hands off my shoulders and step away, trying to clear my head.

Cinna comes over and puts his arm around me. "He's right, Katniss."

I don't know what to think. "I should have been told, so I didn't look so stupid."

"No, your reaction was perfect. If you'd known, it wouldn't have read as real," says Portia.

"She's just worried about her boyfriend," says Peeta gruffly, tossing away a bloody piece of the urn.

My cheeks burn again at the thought of Gale. "I don't have a boyfriend."

"Whatever," says Peeta. "But I bet he's smart enough to know a bluff when he sees it. Besides *you* didn't say you loved *me*. So what does it matter?"

The words are sinking in. My anger fading. I'm torn now between thinking I've been used and thinking I've been given an edge. Haymitch is right. I survived my interview, but what was I really? A silly girl spinning in a sparkling dress. Giggling. The only moment of any substance I had was when I talked about Prim. Compare that with Thresh, his silent, deadly power, and I'm forgettable. Silly and sparkly and forgettable. No, not entirely forgettable, I have my eleven in training.

But now Peeta has made me an object of love. Not just his. To hear him tell it I have many admirers. And if the audience really thinks we're in love... I remember how strongly they responded to his confession. Star-crossed lovers. Haymitch is right, they eat that stuff up in the Capitol. Suddenly I'm worried that I didn't react properly.

"After he said he loved me, did you think I could be in love with him, too?" I ask.

"I did," says Portia. "The way you avoided looking at the cameras, the blush."

The others chime in, agreeing.

"You're golden, sweetheart. You're going to have sponsors lined up around the block," says Haymitch.

I'm embarrassed about my reaction. I force myself to acknowledge Peeta. "I'm sorry I shoved you."

"Doesn't matter," he shrugs. "Although it's technically illegal."

"Are your hands okay?" I ask.

"They'll be all right," he says.

In the silence that follows, delicious smells of our dinner waft in from the dining room. "Come on, let's eat," says Haymitch. We all follow him to the table and take our places. But then Peeta is bleeding too heavily, and Portia leads him off for medical treatment. We start the cream and rose-petal soup without them. By the time we've finished, they're back. Peeta's hands are wrapped in bandages. I can't help feeling guilty. Tomorrow we will be in the arena. He has done me a favor and I have answered with an injury. Will I never stop owing him?

After dinner, we watch the replay in the sitting room. I seem frilly and shallow, twirling and giggling in my dress, although the others assure me I am charming. Peeta actually is charming and then utterly winning as the boy in love. And there I am, blushing and confused, made beautiful by

Cinna's hands, desirable by Peeta's confession, tragic by circumstance, and by all accounts, unforgettable.

When the anthem finishes and the screen goes dark, a hush falls on the room. Tomorrow at dawn, we will be roused and prepared for the arena. The actual Games don't start until ten because so many of the Capitol residents rise late. But Peeta and I must make an early start. There is no telling how far we will travel to the arena that has been prepared for this year's Games.

I know Haymitch and Effie will not be going with us. As soon as they leave here, they'll be at the Games Headquarters, hopefully madly signing up our sponsors, working out a strategy on how and when to deliver the gifts to us. Cinna and Portia will travel with us to the very spot from which we will be launched into the arena. Still final good-byes must be said here.

Effie takes both of us by the hand and, with actual tears in her eyes, wishes us well. Thanks us for being the best tributes it has ever been her privilege to sponsor. And then, because it's Effie and she's apparently required by law to say something awful, she adds "I wouldn't be at all surprised if I finally get promoted to a decent district next year!"

Then she kisses us each on the cheek and hurries out, overcome with either the emotional parting or the possible improvement of her fortunes.

Haymitch crosses his arms and looks us both over.

"Any final words of advice?" asks Peeta.

"When the gong sounds, get the hell out of there. You're neither of you up to the blood bath at the Cornucopia. Just

clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water," he says. "Got it?"

"And after that?" I ask.

"Stay alive," says Haymitch. It's the same advice he gave us on the train, but he's not drunk and laughing this time. And we only nod. What else is there to say?

When I head to my room, Peeta lingers to talk to Portia. I'm glad. Whatever strange words of parting we exchange can wait until tomorrow. My covers are drawn back, but there is no sign of the redheaded Avox girl. I wish I knew her name. I should have asked it. She could write it down maybe. Or act it out. But perhaps that would only result in punishment for her.

I take a shower and scrub the gold paint, the makeup, the scent of beauty from my body. All that remains of the design-team's efforts are the flames on my nails. I decide to keep them as reminder of who I am to the audience. Katniss, the girl who was on fire. Perhaps it will give me something to hold on to in the days to come.

I pull on a thick, fleecy nightgown and climb into bed. It takes me about five seconds to realize I'll never fall asleep. And I need sleep desperately because in the arena every moment I give in to fatigue will be an invitation to death.

It's no good. One hour, two, three pass, and my eyelids refuse to get heavy. I can't stop trying to imagine exactly what terrain I'll be thrown into. Desert? Swamp? A frigid wasteland? Above all I am hoping for trees, which may

afford me some means of concealment and food and shelter. Often there are trees because barren landscapes are dull and the Games resolve too quickly without them. But what will the climate be like? What traps have the Gamemakers hidden to liven up the slower moments? And then there are my fellow tributes . . .

The more anxious I am to find sleep, the more it eludes me. Finally, I am too restless to even stay in bed. I pace the floor, heart beating too fast, breathing too short. My room feels like a prison cell. If I don't get air soon, I'm going to start to throw things again. I run down the hall to the door to the roof. It's not only unlocked but ajar. Perhaps someone forgot to close it, but it doesn't matter. The energy field enclosing the roof prevents any desperate form of escape. And I'm not looking to escape, only to fill my lungs with air. I want to see the sky and the moon on the last night that no one will be hunting me.

The roof is not lit at night, but as soon as my bare feet reach its tiled surface I see his silhouette, black against the lights that shine endlessly in the Capitol. There's quite a commotion going on down in the streets, music and singing and car horns, none of which I could hear through the thick glass window panels in my room. I could slip away now, without him noticing me; he wouldn't hear me over the din. But the night air's so sweet, I can't bear returning to that stuffy cage of a room. And what difference does it make? Whether we speak or not?

My feet move soundlessly across the tiles. I'm only a

yard behind him when I say, "You should be getting some sleep."

He starts but doesn't turn. I can see him give his head a slight shake. "I didn't want to miss the party. It's for us, after all."

I come up beside him and lean over the edge of the rail. The wide streets are full of dancing people. I squint to make out their tiny figures in more detail. "Are they in costumes?"

"Who could tell?" Peeta answers. "With all the crazy clothes they wear here. Couldn't sleep, either?"

"Couldn't turn my mind off," I say.

"Thinking about your family?" he asks.

"No," I admit a bit guiltily. "All I can do is wonder about tomorrow. Which is pointless, of course." In the light from below, I can see his face now, the awkward way he holds his bandaged hands. "I really am sorry about your hands."

"It doesn't matter, Katniss," he says. "I've never been a contender in these Games anyway."

"That's no way to be thinking," I say.

"Why not? It's true. My best hope is to not disgrace myself and . . ." He hesitates.

"And what?" I say.

"I don't know how to say it exactly. Only . . . I want to die as myself. Does that make any sense?" he asks. I shake my head. How could he die as anyone but himself? "I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not."

I bite my lip, feeling inferior. While I've been ruminating on the availability of trees, Peeta has been struggling with how to maintain his identity. His purity of self. "Do you mean you won't kill anyone?" I ask.

"No, when the time comes, I'm sure I'll kill just like everybody else. I can't go down without a fight. Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to . . . to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games," says Peeta.

"But you're not," I say. "None of us are. That's how the Games work."

"Okay, but within that framework, there's still you, there's still me," he insists. "Don't you see?"

"A little. Only . . . no offense, but who cares, Peeta?" I say.

"I do. I mean, what else am I allowed to care about at this point?" he asks angrily. He's locked those blue eyes on mine now, demanding an answer.

I take a step back. "Care about what Haymitch said. About staying alive."

Peeta smiles at me, sad and mocking. "Okay. Thanks for the tip, sweetheart."

It's like a slap in the face. His use of Haymitch's patronizing endearment. "Look, if you want to spend the last hours of your life planning some noble death in the arena, that's your choice. I want to spend mine in District Twelve."

"Wouldn't surprise me if you do," says Peeta. "Give my mother my best when you make it back, will you?"

"Count on it," I say. Then I turn and leave the roof.

I spend the rest of the night slipping in and out of a doze, imagining the cutting remarks I will make to Peeta Mellark in the morning. Peeta Mellark. We will see how high and mighty he is when he's faced with life and death. He'll probably turn into one of those raging beast tributes, the kind who tries to eat someone's heart after they've killed them. There was a guy like that a few years ago from District 6 called Titus. He went completely savage and the Gamemakers had to have him stunned with electric guns to collect the bodies of the players he'd killed before he ate them. There are no rules in the arena, but cannibalism doesn't play well with the Capitol audience, so they tried to head it off. There was some speculation that the avalanche that finally took Titus out was specifically engineered to ensure the victor was not a lunatic.

I don't see Peeta in the morning. Cinna comes to me before dawn, gives me a simple shift to wear, and guides me to the roof. My final dressing and preparations will be done in the catacombs under the arena itself. A hovercraft appears out of thin air, just like the one did in the woods the day I saw the redheaded Avox girl captured, and a ladder drops down. I place my hands and feet on the lower rungs and instantly it's as if I'm frozen. Some sort of current glues me to the ladder while I'm lifted safely inside.

I expect the ladder to release me then, but I'm still stuck when a woman in a white coat approaches me carrying a syringe. "This is just your tracker, Katniss. The stiller you are, the more efficiently I can place it," she says.

Still? I'm a statue. But that doesn't prevent me from

out. Poisoned one. She claimed she had no knowledge the ring transformed and there was no way to prove she did. But she lost her token. There, you're all set. Move around. Make sure everything feels comfortable."

I walk, run in a circle, swing my arms about. "Yes, it's fine. Fits perfectly."

"Then there's nothing to do but wait for the call," says Cinna. "Unless you think you could eat any more?"

I turn down food but accept a glass of water that I take tiny sips of as we wait on a couch. I don't want to chew on my nails or lips, so I find myself gnawing on the inside of my cheek. It still hasn't fully healed from a few days ago. Soon the taste of blood fills my mouth.

Nervousness seeps into terror as I anticipate what is to come. I could be dead, flat-out dead, in an hour. Not even. My fingers obsessively trace the hard little lump on my forearm where the woman injected the tracking device. I press on it, even though it hurts, I press on it so hard a small bruise begins to form.

"Do you want to talk, Katniss?" Cinna asks.

I shake my head but after a moment hold out my hand to him. Cinna encloses it in both of his. And this is how we sit until a pleasant female voice announces it's time to prepare for launch.

Still clenching one of Cinna's hands, I walk over and stand on the circular metal plate. "Remember what Haymitch said. Run, find water. The rest will follow," he says. I nod. "And remember this. I'm not allowed to bet, but if I could, my money would be on you."

"Truly?" I whisper.

"Truly," says Cinna. He leans down and kisses me on the forehead. "Good luck, girl on fire." And then a glass cylinder is lowering around me, breaking our handhold, cutting him off from me. He taps his fingers under his chin. Head high.

I lift my chin and stand as straight as I can. The cylinder begins to rise. For maybe fifteen seconds, I'm in darkness and then I can feel the metal plate pushing me out of the cylinder, into the open air. For a moment, my eyes are dazzled by the bright sunlight and I'm conscious only of a strong wind with the hopeful smell of pine trees.

Then I hear the legendary announcer, Claudius Templesmith, as his voice booms all around me.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games begin!"



feeling the sharp stab of pain as the needle inserts the metal tracking device deep under the skin on the inside of my forearm. Now the Gamemakers will always be able to trace my whereabouts in the arena. Wouldn't want to lose a tribute.

As soon as the tracker's in place, the ladder releases me. The woman disappears and Cinna is retrieved from the roof. An Avox boy comes in and directs us to a room where breakfast has been laid out. Despite the tension in my stomach, I eat as much as I can, although none of the delectable food makes any impression on me. I'm so nervous, I could be eating coal dust. The one thing that distracts me at all is the view from the windows as we sail over the city and then to the wilderness beyond. This is what birds see. Only they're free and safe. The very opposite of me.

The ride lasts about half an hour before the windows black out, suggesting that we're nearing the arena. The hovercraft lands and Cinna and I go back to the ladder, only this time it leads down into a tube underground, into the catacombs that lie beneath the arena. We follow instructions to my destination, a chamber for my preparation. In the Capitol, they call it the Launch Room. In the districts, it's referred to as the Stockyard. The place animals go before slaughter.

Everything is brand-new, I will be the first and only tribute to use this Launch Room. The arenas are historic sites, preserved after the Games. Popular destinations for Capitol residents to visit, to vacation. Go for a month, rewatch the

Games, tour the catacombs, visit the sites where the deaths took place. You can even take part in reenactments.

They say the food is excellent.

I struggle to keep my breakfast down as I shower and clean my teeth. Cinna does my hair in my simple trademark braid down my back. Then the clothes arrive, the same for every tribute. Cinna has had no say in my outfit, does not even know what will be in the package, but he helps me dress in the undergarments, simple tawny pants, light green blouse, sturdy brown belt, and thin, hooded black jacket that falls to my thighs. "The material in the jacket's designed to reflect body heat. Expect some cool nights," he says.

The boots, worn over skintight socks, are better than I could have hoped for. Soft leather not unlike my ones at home. These have a narrow flexible rubber sole with treads, though. Good for running.

I think I'm finished when Cinna pulls the gold mockingjay pin from his pocket. I had completely forgotten about it.

"Where did you get that?" I ask.

"Off the green outfit you wore on the train," he says. I remember now taking it off my mother's dress, pinning it to the shirt. "It's your district token, right?" I nod and he fastens it on my shirt. "It barely cleared the review board. Some thought the pin could be used as a weapon, giving you an unfair advantage. But eventually, they let it through," says Cinna. "They eliminated a ring from that District One girl, though. If you twisted the gemstone, a spike popped